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JOURNAL OF  
THE TRANSACTIONS  
OF  
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1907.

## ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING.\*

CAPTAIN HEATH, R.N., IN THE CHAIR.

The Minutes of the previous Meeting were read and confirmed.

The following candidates were put forward for election by the Council and elected :—

ASSOCIATES.—H. Neville Harris, Esq., India Civil Service (Retired);  
Rev. Prof. F. J. Jewett, B.D., Texas, U.S.A.

The following paper was read by the Author :—

*THE SCRIPTURAL IDEA OF MIRACLES.*

By Rev. Canon R. B. GIRDLESTONE, M.A.

- § 1. Nature and God according to the Bible.
- § 2. God's hand in Evolution and in Growth.
- § 3. Doctrines common to the Bible and natural science.
- § 4. Phenomena which the Bible records, but which natural science cannot formulate.
- § 5. Biblical miracles.
- § 6. Miraculous phenomena connected with the mission of Christ.
- § 7. The Philosophy of miracles.
- § 8. The question of evidence.
- § 9. Gospel miracles carry their own evidence with them.
- § 10. Conclusion.

## § 1. NATURE AND GOD ACCORDING TO THE BIBLE.

**T**HE Bible and natural science regard nature from different but not necessarily from antagonistic points of view. It is frequently supposed that if you believe in the Bible you cannot believe in Science, and that if you believe in Science you cannot believe in the Bible; but the two beliefs are not necessarily irreconcilable. The Bible sets forth the spiritual

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\* 21st January, 1907.

side of nature and links all things with God. It frequently passes over intermediate processes, just as we do in common conversation, as when we say (for instance) "it rains." The man of science on the contrary is busy with processes. The first chapter of the Bible describes the origin of the existing order of things. It gives us a bird's-eye view of nature. It is a *multum in parvo*, not an encyclopædia. It tells us of results rather than of processes. Its main object is to produce a certain impression on the mind with regard to the living God. Certainly it leaves plenty of room for the investigations of the man of science. He may be an astronomer, a geologist, a meteorologist, a chemist, a botanist, a comparative anatomist; but to one and all the first page of the Bible says, "Come hither and behold the wonderful works of God."

The Bible student is liable to mistakes. He sometimes reads into the Hebrew Scriptures what is not in them, and sometimes through mistaken reverence tries to close the door against the enquirer who wishes to know both the "how" and the "why" of everything. The student of nature is also liable to mistakes. He is not content with aiming at a catalogue of the myriad of things which make up nature, nor would he be satisfied even if he could formulate the rules and methods whereby the whole system of nature is carried on. He wants to get further back, to detect nature in its most primitive workings before it got to be what it now is, before the stratification of the earth's crust had begun, before matter had solidified, before the fiery *nebulae* had clustered round their centres, before the atoms had ranged themselves into the elements, before electricity had spoken its first word. These investigations are now in full swing. They are grand in conception: but they are attended by a certain risk which may be hinted at by a word which I use in no offensive sense—nature-worship.

Let us suppose that in course of time Science should succeed in formulating natural monism, *i.e.*, should trace all the forms of matter to electricity, and all the processes of electricity to one. This would be the master key to nature. It would have the promise and potency of all known phenomena wrapped up within itself, and would be the universal parent of all things visible and invisible, including of course the Mind which has discovered this wonderful thing, and the human Spirit in all its phases and possibilities. But should we even then do without God? There is something in our nature which inevitably demands a hearing, and which appeals not to electricity but to

a personal spiritual author not only of electricity but of the human spirit, in other words, to God. All Christians are monists, but we get our monism out of the first verse of the Bible.

Where then does nature end and God begin? We are perpetually adjusting and readjusting our answer, delimiting the border of the known and the unknown, of the physical and the spiritual, exploring, in imagination, the regions beyond, sometimes almost succeeding in unifying mind with matter, and yet after all having to confess our failure. This is because we are what we are, in the world but not of the world, in the flesh but not of the flesh. The mysterious *ego* stands aloof from the phenomena of the physical universe and witnesses for God. If He is inscrutable, so are we.

### § 2. GOD'S HAND IN EVOLUTION AND IN GROWTH.

The missing link between the beginning of all things and the present state of the world is supposed to lie in the hand of the Evolutionist. At times the word Evolution becomes almost oppressive. It is regarded as the prime minister of creation. Perhaps it is so; who can say for certain? but, after all it is only a minister. It is not automatic; nor is it a substitute for creation—only a suggested method. Moreover, it has to do with the past—mainly if not entirely. It is intended to account for the multiplicity of “kinds” from matter up to man. But now we depend not on fresh processes of Evolution but on post-Evolutionary Growth. I am inclined to think that the power and wisdom of God may be seen more clearly in the phenomena of growth than in the theory of Evolution. Take, for example, the growth of a chicken within its prisonhouse the egg-shell. Here we have a fact staring us daily in the face. How many millions of years are needed for the development of that chicken from a protoplasmic speck? It would seem as if a million years of evolution became one day in growth. Bear in mind that in saying this I am not mocking at the labours of the evolutionist, but appealing for a full recognition of the daily miracles of nature in the animal and vegetable world. Every “kind” is a terminus to the preceding process which we now call Evolution; then Growth comes on the scene and shows us the handiwork of the living Architect of the Universe as He now operates in nature.

### § 3. DOCTRINES COMMON TO THE BIBLE AND NATURAL SCIENCE.

There are certain things which the Bible and natural science teach in common, and we do well to recognise them. I will

leave the student to determine for himself which was first in the field.

(1) *Both proclaim the unity of Nature.*

Whether the book of Genesis is an historical work dating from the patriarchal period, as I believe, or whether it is a patchwork put together from old traditions and myths in later ages, it did this great thing—it testified that all nature was one inasmuch as it was ultimately traceable to one Author. “The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof.” Science has laboriously reached the same result though by a different road. It has learnt the correlation of physical forces not only upon earth but in the heavens. It is sufficient for me to refer to the late Duke of Argyll’s book on this great subject.

(2) *Both agree in the fixity, stability and continuity of Nature.*

The Psalms express this truth in sublime language, recognising as they do that this fixity is the result of a Divine decree. “He hath established them for ever and ever; He hath made a decree which shall not pass.” Isaiah speaks to the same effect, though he points to a period when the existing order of things shall pass away.

On the scientific side I need only remind you of the late Professor Balfour Stewart’s instructive book on *The Conservation of Energy*, and of that other notable book, I hope not yet forgotten, *The Unseen Universe*.

(3) *Both agree in the doctrine of causation, i.e., that natural phenomena are under control and are the result of ordered forces.*

No effect is produced without a cause; the same causes produce the same effects; if they do not follow, it is because we have neglected some factor in the causes. I do not say—science does not say—that no physical effect is produced without a physical cause. It is here that one has to weigh one’s words most carefully. Man’s will is, properly speaking, not a physical cause, but it produces wonderful physical effects. A word is a cause of action, and a thought is the cause of the word being spoken, and the *ego* is the thinker, though he utilises his brains in thinking. The Bible says of God, “He spake and it was done,” and constantly reminds us that He is the author of the forces (in other words, of the causes) operating in nature.

Nothing is left to chance in the material world; fixed causes produce fixed results which cannot be evaded. There is thus a sort of necessity imposed on our material surroundings, yet we ourselves rise above it, not that we are absolutely free, but that our human will has to be reckoned with as among the causes of things. Modern psychology does not ignore these facts of consciousness.

Dean Mansel in his powerful essay on miracles in *Aids to Faith* (p. 19), says, "Deny the existence of a free will in man; and neither the possibility of miracles, nor any other question of religion or morality is worth contending about. Admit the existence of free will in man; and we have the experience of a power, analogous, however inferior, to that which is supposed to operate in the production of a miracle, and forming the basis of a legitimate argument from the less to the greater. In the will of man we have the solitary instance of an efficient cause in the highest sense of the term, acting among and along with the physical causes of the material world, and producing results which would not have been brought about by any invariable sequence of physical causes left to their own action. We have evidence also of an elasticity, so to speak, in the constitution of nature, which permits the influence of human power on the phenomena of the world to be exercised or suspended at will, without affecting the stability of the whole."

(4) *They agree in the position assigned to man.*

The Bible gives man dominion over earth and its inhabitants. He is at liberty to turn them all to his own account. Science says that man has the biggest brains of any animal in proportion to his size; hence his extraordinary powers and his adaptability to almost every possible environment. He has the gift of insight into the processes of nature; he weighs the planets, tells us what metals are to be found in the stars, fastens the electric force to his carriage, spoils the animal, vegetable, and mineral worlds of their possessions, reproduces the past, anticipates the future, and lifts his mind up to communion with the unseen God.

§ 4. PHENOMENA WHICH SCRIPTURE RECORDS BUT WHICH  
NATURAL SCIENCE CANNOT FORMULATE.

I have by no means exhausted the points of union between the Bible and science, but I go on to observe that there are:

some subjects frequently referred to in the Bible which natural science is not in a position to fathom. It must observe, compare, test and check results before it can draw conclusions and formulate results; and this does not seem possible in the following cases :—

- (1) *The ways of Providence.*—By this I mean not so much the provision made for man, in his adaptation to earth, and *vice versâ*, but rather the fact that all nature and all human action are subservient to divine purpose.
- (2) *Prayer.*—By this pouring out of the soul God is acknowledged and worshipped, and His divine intervention is sought in the interests of individuals and communities, according to Scripture. Prayer is certainly recognised as a force; but it has its limitations and conditions.
- (3) *Inspiration.*—Special communications and influences from above may be brought under this head; inspiration properly includes all direct action of the spirit of God on the spirit of man.
- (4) *Prophecy.*—The utterance of divine truth and the laying down of the programme of divine purpose as affecting the future of individuals, of communities, and of the world at large.
- (5) *Angelic visitations.*—These imply the existence of superhuman beings in a sphere more ethereal or less material than our own.
- (6) *Miracles; i.e.,* physical phenomena which are unaccountable by the known laws and processes of nature. To these I must now confine myself, and I give this as only a provisional definition of them.

#### § 5. BIBLICAL MIRACLES.

No distinction is insisted on in the Bible between what is natural and what is supernatural. The course of nature is God's ordinary way of action, and the laws of nature are His ordinary rules, but He is not absolutely restricted to them. There may be agencies stored up both in the natural and in the spiritual world of which we have no conception at present. The bounds of the possible, in nature as well as out of it, have not yet been reached.

Nor is any rigid line to be drawn between what is Providential, that is to say, a special application of the ordinary known forces of nature, and what is miraculous, *i.e.,* something



which cannot be so described. Students will classify these differently.

The flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; the leprosy of Miriam and of Gehazi; the swallowing up of Korah; the death of Ahab in consequence of the bow drawn at a venture; the block in the Jordan which enabled Israel to go over dryshod; these may have called for no special agency, but they were *timed* to happen at a particular moment in connection with certain other events. But in the case of Aaron's rod which budded, or Balaam's ass that spoke, or the Pillar of Fire, or the signs granted to Hezekiah and to Jonah, we see events which cannot be altogether accounted for by known forces. Occasionally the means whereby an effect was produced are recorded, as in the case of the wind bringing the locusts, or drying up the Red Sea. Sometimes the thing which is done is wrought through delegated human agency, or through inspired human words of prayer, as in the case of the prolonged day in Joshua's time,\* and the descent of the fire in answer to Elijah, and the coming and going of the plagues of Egypt in connection with the intercession of Moses.

We have lost the original idea and intention of miracles. They are never regarded in the Bible as Hume regarded them as violations of the laws of nature. The three Hebrew words used of them in the Old Testament and the three Greek words in the New Testament show that they are manifestations of *power* ("mighty works"), that they call forth *wonder* (which is the true idea of the word "miracle"), and that they are *signs* attesting the mission of the person who does them. The first definite miracles wrought by the hand of man are probably those wrought by Moses; and they were his credentials. It is only fair to the Biblical miracles that they should be studied in their completeness, as a long series culminating in the mission of the Lord Jesus Christ. They are associated with spiritual teaching, and they are recorded by men who give full proof of their honesty and candour. Moreover, there is nothing grotesque about them, nor are they like fables or fairy tales. This is peculiarly the case with the wonderful works of Christ, and with the other special events associated with His mission.

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\* This does not necessarily seem to belong to the list of miracles. It is partly a quotation from a poetic account in "the book of Jasher," as is clear from the passage, Josh. x, 13. See also Habakkuk iii, 11.—ED.

## § 6. MIRACULOUS PHENOMENA CONNECTED WITH THE MISSION OF CHRIST.

These include the following classes of phenomena:—

- (1) Angelic visitations associated with the coming of Christ to earth.
- (2) The Incarnation, *i.e.*, the entrance of a pre-existent Being into human nature.—“The Word became Flesh.”
- (3) The conception of Christ by the Holy Ghost and His consequent birth of a pure virgin.
- (4) Prophetic messages uttered by John the Baptist and by our Lord Himself.
- (5) The series of mighty works done by Him during the three years of His ministration. These included healing of bodily diseases, restoration of the dead to life, driving demons out of the possessed, stilling the storm, walking on the water, and feeding many thousands of people under exceptional circumstances.
- (6) Three days after the crucifixion and death of this wonderful Personage, His grave is found to be empty and His bodily life is carried on under new conditions.
- (7) Special phenomena connected with the day of Pentecost consequent on His triumphant exaltation to the spirit world.

These classes of phenomena harmonise with one another and contribute to one great end. They are frequently identical in character with events recorded in the Old Testament. In both we find angelic utterances, prophecies, births under exceptional circumstances, cases of healing, feeding, raising from the dead, and ascension to heaven. The salient distinction between the cases mentioned in the Old Testament and those in the New is that whilst in the former the mighty works in question were spread over 1,000 years, in the latter they were mainly wrought by one Person, and all in one generation.

All of them when examined with the context are illustrative of the mission of Christ and are the exercise of prerogatives ascribed to God in the Old Testament. Many works of a similar character were wrought by the Lord's immediate followers, who received special power from Him for the purpose.

## § 7. THE PHILOSOPHY OF MIRACLES.

On surveying these phenomena it is plain that they take us out of the world of ordinary nature. We are in the region of the supernatural, the preternatural, the superhuman, the extraordinary, in fact the spiritual. But is there such a region ?

Few scientific men will give a direct negative answer. Their attitude towards this spiritual *hinterland* is closely related to their convictions concerning God. Physical investigations constantly reach into the unknown and when we approach it we become immediately conscious of our limitations. We cling to the ordinary course of nature but gaze into the regions beyond. After all, God is there.

Our late President, Sir G. Stokes, puts the matter thus :— “ Admit the existence of a God, of a personal God, and the possibility of miracle follows at once. If the laws of nature are carried on in accordance with His will, He who willed them may will their suspension. And if any difficulty should be felt as to their suspension, we are not even obliged to suppose that they have been suspended, it may be that the event which we call a miracle was brought about, not by any suspension of laws in ordinary operation, but by the super-addition of something not ordinarily in operation; or if in operation, of such a nature that its operation is not perceived.”\*

This simple statement goes to the root of the matter. There are scores of possibilities within the divine treasury. Human beings, that is, those whose reason is mainly adapted for the investigation of nature, are not admitted. The treasure-house is locked up; but God keeps the key.

Thus, whilst our respect for the results of scientific discovery may at first cause men to demur to the gospel story because science cannot fully grasp it, further thought justifies us in accepting it as it stands. Nay more, without it there would have been no Gospel for the world. But science is not to be altogether passive. What we call “ The laws of nature ” are simply the rules or habitual processes of the world, so far as they can be detected and formulated. They have to do in the first place with the material side of existence; but when we pass to the spiritual element in human nature we find by practical experience that new forces and new processes are at work, and consequently that new laws have to be formulated.

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\* Gifford Lectures, First Series, p. 24.

We may group the phenomena and possibilities of existence in some such order as this:—

- (i) What nature, in the ordinary sense of the word, can do apart from man.
- (ii) What can be done over and above nature through the operation of the human will.
- (iii) What can be done in addition under the influence and direction of the Author of both nature and man.

Thus we have the sub-human, the human, the superhuman. The second group is not a violation of the first, nor is the third a violation of the second. The three make up nature in its highest sense as signifying God's method of acting on and through His creatures. The importance of this threefold scheme has been recognised by Dean Mansel, Professor Pritchard of Oxford, Professor Challis of Cambridge, and other men of science, but it needs constant reiteration.

We all acknowledge that the forces detected by science in the material world work systematically, not casually, and that if we knew the rules perfectly we could predict all such things as the time and place of the fall of any particular leaf. But let a child come on the scene. Then a new set of rules comes into action and we cannot predict with the same certainty. Will the child run to catch the leaf before it reaches the ground? It is no longer a question of calculable physical forces but of mental decision and of consequent muscular action; and we can only guess. There is no breach of law; but another kind of force, apparently immaterial, comes into play. So it is when God comes on the scene either to prepare the way for Christ or to exhibit Him and to be manifested in Him.

The late Professor Challis, in writing on this subject\* some years ago, cited J. S. Mill to the following effect:—he admits that a cause may be counteracted by the direct interposition of an act of the will of some being who has power over nature, and if the being has endowed all causes with the powers that produce their effects, his will may well be supposed able to counteract them. Thus a miracle (Mill continues) is no contradiction to the law of cause and effect; it is merely a new effect produced by the introduction of a new cause (Mill's *Logic*, ii, 167). This being the case, as Professor Challis goes on to say, it becomes solely a question of the credibility of the testimony.

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\* Letter to the *Guardian*, November 27th, 1874.

## § 8. THE QUESTION OF EVIDENCE.

In considering the evidence of the truth of the sacred record which contains the miracles, it is manifest that testimony has to do with the actual phenomena observed; not with their hidden causes. Also whole series of phenomena bearing on the mission of Christ have to be considered together. Each book which contains or implies such phenomena has to be studied in itself and in connection with the other books. Each event has to be examined in the light of the whole divine intervention of which it professedly forms a part. Also, certain central or champion phenomena have to be selected for special study. This is necessary because few things which happened 2,000 years ago can be verified by ordinary historical investigation. Of course, a scientific student does not lightly accept testimony to an event which he cannot verify; nevertheless, evidence to the series as a whole, or to leading events in the series, may be of such a character that he is compelled to yield. Even Hume admitted that evidence might be so strong that the rejection of it would be more difficult than the rejection of the supernatural. Renan and Huxley were of the same opinion.\* History must be allowed to tell its own tale in its own way, if only the canons of historical truth are satisfied. The question of questions asked in the twentieth century was asked with equal urgency by men who staked their lives on the answer in the second century. It is this: May we trust the mission of Christ as narrated with substantial agreement, though with more or less variation as to detail, by the four Evangelists? In answer, it must be said that whilst the genuineness of the Gospels as a whole is accepted by all or almost all students of history numerous efforts have been made to eliminate the supernatural from them.

Thus, it has been suggested that the so-called miracles were wrought by natural agencies; or, that they were illusions and were effects of a strong will acting on excited nerves; or, that they are a misinterpretation of Oriental hyperbolic language; or, that they are legendary accretions which did not exist in the lost original Gospel.

The last is the fashionable theory just at present in some quarters, but the burden of proof manifestly lies with the upholders of it. They have yet to produce the original Gospels; or to distinguish (say, in St. Mark, which is

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\* See Barnes' *Christian Evidences*, pp. 147 and 149.

considered nearest to the original) the portions which have been added between the days of the Apostles and the days of Justin Martyr.

In answer to such speculations the late Professor Smyth, formerly Professor of History in Cambridge, points out in his work on Christian evidences that the miracles are narrated naturally and circumstantially, not in grandiloquent style, not argumentatively, not apologetically. They were read in public from very early times, and wholesale alterations could not have been introduced without observation.

It is a curious thing that accretionists rely much on the inconsistencies to be found in the Gospels. But do they suppose that those ingenious persons who foisted in the miracles also foisted in the inconsistencies in the accounts of the miracles? This would seem rather a suicidal course.

We frankly acknowledge that "legendary accretions" came into existence very early in the history of the churches. Our gospels, however, were evidently too scrupulously watched over to allow of their being tampered with, and accordingly the writers of the accretions had to make new gospels, or, as they are usually called, Apocryphal Gospels. The series commenced in the second century and ran on for some hundreds of years. They are compounded from imagination rather than from tradition and were intended either to teach error, or to satisfy curiosity on certain subjects. In Mr. Harris Cowper's preface to his edition of the Apocryphal Gospels, he says, "before I undertook this work I never realised so completely as I do now the impassable character of the gulf which separates the genuine gospels from these. . . . All who read them with any attention will see that they are fictions not histories; not traditions even so much as legends. They are all spurious; they all seek to supplement or develop the writings of the New Testament, and all that we have are of more recent date than any of the canonical books."

In the edition which forms part of the Ante-Nicene library there are versions of twenty-two of these so-called gospels, but none of them profess to give an account of the Lord's ministry; they are occupied with matters relating to His birth and youth, or to His descent into Hades. The editor says of them, "they leave on our minds a profound sense of the immeasurable superiority and the unapproachable simplicity and majesty of the canonical writings."

What is the class of miracles which they narrate? They are the same kind that we read in fairy stories and folk-lore,

and Indian legend and Greek myth, suited rather to a magician than to a Saviour. But, as Origen wisely says in answer to Celsus, "Show me the magician who calls upon the spectators of his prodigies to reform their life. . . . The miracles of Christ bear the impress of His own holiness, and He ever uses them as the means of winning to the cause of goodness and truth those who witnessed them." The very opposite is true of these apocryphal narratives. They may be truly called "unhistorical," and by their very contrast they testify to the historical character of the four Gospels.

#### § 9. GOSPEL MIRACLES CARRY THEIR OWN EVIDENCE WITH THEM.

Among the essays of De Quincey there is one on "Miracles as Subjects of Testimony."\* The writer puts Hume's argument in a nutshell, and divides the possibilities of testimony into three classes: first, the case of a single witness; secondly, that of many witnesses; thirdly, that of our own selves. After dealing shortly with the first and second, he discusses the third more fully. Here experience comes in, and doubt vanishes. He further distinguishes *evidential* miracles, which simply prove Christianity, from *constituent* miracles which are Christianity. The first are Credentials, the second Essentials. These last include our Lord's birth and resurrection. He proceeds to dwell on the moral purpose of Christ's miracles and of His mission generally, and points out that the end aimed at called for supernatural means, inasmuch as it is at least equal in importance to the end of original creation. This witness is true, and it is specially interesting as coming from such a source. A scientific study of the Bible teaches us that Christianity is part of a large scheme. On the one hand it is the undoing of the personal and social evils by which human life is infested and debased. On the other it is the bringing men of all sorts and conditions into true relationship with the Fountain Head, and the enabling them by His spirit to share His nature.

We are thus in a position to verify Christianity for ourselves, to "try it," as Coleridge once said. If we find that Christ's mission is producing its normal results wherever its conditions are fulfilled, then we are prepared to endorse the narratives taken as a whole. If, on the contrary, we fail, after careful

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\* *Works*, vol. vii, 234 (Author's Edit. 1862).

reading and enquiry and personal thought, to find the mission of Christ to be a force leading to a God-like life, then we must reconsider our position.

Hear the view of one of our most thoughtful writers on the subject. Mr. Lecky in his *History of Morality* (vol. ii) says, "It was reserved for Christianity to present to the world an ideal character which has filled the hearts of men with an impassioned love, and has shown itself capable of acting on all ages, nations, temperaments, and conditions; and has not only been the highest pattern of virtue, but the highest incentive to its practice; and has exerted so deep an influence that it may be freely said that the simple record of three short years of active life has done more to regenerate and soften mankind than all the disquisitions of philosophers and than all the exhortations of moralists."

#### § 10. CONCLUSION.

I have been trying to show the relative position of scriptural miracles, nature and science. If miracles are not impossible, if experience verifies Christ's mission of which the miracles is an integral part, if Christ Himself be the miracle of miracles, the conclusion seems obvious.

In discussing the physical phenomena which we call miracles we are really dealing with the spiritual, we are studying the footprints of Him Who is supreme, Whose throne is in heaven while His feet are on earth. We are dealing with what are called the powers of the world to come, and with a sphere where much which is now called supernatural or superhuman will prove to be natural and human. The scriptural idea of miracles is that they bring God to the front, they are condensed and perhaps accelerated samples of divine action.

In Hume's posthumous dialogue on natural religion there are some such words as these: "Supposing there were a God who did not discover Himself immediately to our senses, were it possible for Him to give stronger proofs of His existence than what appears on the whole face of nature? What indeed would such a Being do but copy the present economy of things, render many of His artifices so plain that no stupidity could mistake them, and afford glimpses of still greater artifices which demonstrate His prodigious superiority over our narrow apprehension?"

This is true, but it is not everything. As Christ's teaching



shows us our failures and our needs, so His mighty works show us God's power and the riches of His grace.

Supposing we were to blot out from the Bible all that savours of the supernatural, should we be better off or worse off than we are now? We will imagine, for example, that Christ was born in the ordinary way, lived as an ordinary Jew, and became a social reformer, but that He died in early life on the cross and so came to an end.

Would this have been a Gospel? Would it have quickened men into newness of life? would it have affected the stubborn Jew, the philosophical Greek, the imperial Roman, and uncultured barbarian? Would anyone have cared to preach it? or to endure persecution for it? or to suffer death for it?

Let us suppose on the contrary that human beings had a great need, and that God alone could satisfy it by a special mode of intervention, that this involved a course of self-sacrifice in order to ensure final victory over evil. Then we can readily understand that the Being who was to carry out this great work would have to link Himself with human nature in a special way, would give many practical illustrations of divine love during His life-time, and that finally His death would be swallowed up in His resurrection life.

This which I have put as a supposition proves to be a historic fact. Thus the scriptural idea of miracles gathers itself up in Christ and appeals to our heart, to our head, to our conscience. It is our inspiration and our hope.

#### DISCUSSION.

The Rev. A. IRVING, D.Sc., B.A., thought that a very able and valuable paper had just been read, and expressed his warmest thanks to the author. It covered some of the ground taken up in his own paper last year on "Evolutionary Law in the Creation Story of Genesis," and in a way supplemented that paper.\* He had thought more than once of offering a paper to the Institute on similar lines; but he was happy to find that Canon Girdlestone had so well anticipated him, and had dealt with the subject with a breadth of view and a catholicity of sentiment, which were admirable. It

\* *Trans. Vict. Inst.*, vol. xxxviii, p. 69.

showed how valuable to many a professed student of science was some real knowledge of the philosophy of Mill and Bain, as a safeguard to specialists outside their own line of work.

Having said so much by way of appreciation of the paper as a whole, he hoped the author would pardon him for a little friendly criticism of one or two minor points. He speaks of "the atoms ranging themselves into the elements." The atoms, however, *are* the elements. Did not the author really mean "electrons" ?

Again, the phrase, "the daily miracles of nature in the animal and vegetable world," reminded the speaker of a remark which he heard Lord Kelvin make three or four years ago at University College, in the discussion of a lecture on "Darwinism" by Professor Henslow. Lord Kelvin remarked that every blade of grass and every living thing is a "miracle," when viewed from the standpoint of physics ; and quoted a saying of the great chemist Liebig to him years ago, that he no more believed that the grass and flowers they then saw around them came to be what they are by a "fortuitous concourse of atoms, than he believed the pages of a text-book of Botany in which they were described, came into being by such a process." The speaker was glad to see that the *Unseen Universe* was a book not entirely forgotten, and instanced an illustration, given by the authors of that work, of the intervention of Will or Volition in determining the results, when a man pulls the trigger of a gun or pistol ; where an act of the human will directs mechanical force to the generation of heat and the consequent rousing into activity of the latent energy stored up in the powder.

While in general agreement with what the author had said on the six points enumerated he thought the definition given of "Miracles" about the safest definition that can be given. But he must take exception to the author's introduction of the word "supernatural" into the discussion. Though a favourite word with theologians of a certain type, it was a foolish word : it involved *petitio principii* in an argument, because it assumed that we have clear and definite knowledge of what are the limits of "the natural."

As to Hume's ideas, they were a creditable and honest attempt *at the time* to think out these matters ; but they were put forward by a man who lived (we might almost say) in pre-scientific days, and

therefore their value was to be largely discounted in the light of our more extended knowledge, not only of phenomena but of the occult forces of nature. To give more definiteness to his criticism of the word "supernatural" (and to a less extent of the words "preternatural" and "superhuman"), the speaker quoted from a paper privately printed some four years ago as a *critique* of the position taken up by the Dean of Ripon on the dogma of the Virgin Birth, in which he had preferred the word *preter-scientific*, as one which the evolutionist might safely use in speaking of the possibility of an influence of mind and will leading gradually to results, in which the moral and spiritual is seen to dominate the material. Here we recognise the principle of *directivity* in the order of nature. Such a term might be called unscientific, but it was not *anti-scientific*; that is to say, did not of necessity involve a breach of the *law of continuity*, of all the factors of which Science could not claim certain knowledge. Sound logic requires us to discriminate between "the contrary" and "the contradictory."

This leads us up to the "wonderful works" of Christ, of which he wished to speak with the more emphasis in view of some things contained in the address given by Professor Silvanus Thompson to the Institute a year and a half ago. In the first place it was well to notice that the "miracles" of Christ were *never tentative, never experimental*; you never find Him making an experiment on the human or any other subject. Whether we take the Gospels as they stand, or the testimony of His "Witnesses," the Apostles, the Christ of the New Testament is presented to us as One in whose whole life and work and teaching preter-scientific powers exhibited themselves. This is put forward with especial emphasis by St. Peter in Acts ii, 22 (where he challenges his audience to contradict his statements of fact), and by St. Paul in Romans i, 4, who speaks of Him (in his greatest epistle) as One "declared to be the Son of God with power," by the evidence of His life and resurrection. We cannot get away from the fact (everywhere patent in the Gospels) that our Lord staked the truth of His teaching on *powers inherent in His Person*, such as have never been exhibited by any man before or since; and above all He appealed repeatedly to the evidence of His resurrection before that was an accomplished fact. And when we think of the palpable and unmistakable evidence furnished in the Gospels, it is surely impossible for the mind of any fair and candid person to

explain away the fact that our Lord's human consciousness was penetrated through and through with the knowledge that in Him there were inherent powers more than human. So that, if men say that "Christianity is Christ," while they refuse to recognise the very basis upon which He claimed to rest His authority, the "Christ" left to them is an emasculated Christ, and not the Christ of the Gospels and of the Church.

In his seventh Bampton Lecture, Archbishop Temple remarks:—

"It is not possible to get rid of miracles from the history of the Apostles. They testify to our Lord's Resurrection as an actual fact, and they make it the basis of all their preaching. They testify to our Lord's miracles as *a part of the character of His life.*"

This brings us to the argument elaborated years ago by Paley, whose book still holds its ground in the ancient University of Cambridge.

Lieut.-Colonel G. MACKINLAY.—This excellent paper comes at an opportune time. The illustration of the child and the falling leaf appears to give the most probable explanation of miracles—no breach of natural law, but another kind of force brought into play.

Again, the Canon remarks on the *timing* of certain wonderful events in Scripture; this appears to be a salient feature with many of them, not only with those which may have been performed by agencies familiar to us, but also with others in which the agency was certainly supernatural, for instance—

(a) When the Saviour was dying the light of the sun failed (the sun failing, Gk.) Luke xxiii, 45; Christ had been called the sun prophetically (Is. ix, 2; Mal. iv, 2), and He had proclaimed Himself under the same figure, when He said, "I am the Light of the World" (John viii, 12; ix, 4, 5).

(b) The miracle of the resurrection took place at about the time of the vernal equinox, when the power of the sun on the earth is most rapidly increasing. This miracle was also timed to occur on the day when the first-fruits were presented before the Lord "on the morrow after the Sabbath" (Lev. xxiii, 10, 11) after the Passover, and this coincidence is alluded to in 1 Cor. xv, 20, 23.

(c) The Ascension took place when the moon of the month following that of the Passover was fading from the sky, for it was some forty-three days (Matt. xii, 40, Acts i, 3), after the Crucifixion,

which was at full moon ; the disappearing moon at the Ascension was thus a sign of the departure of Christ from the earth. This is in accord with Gen. i, 14, where it is stated that the two great lights are for "Signs" as well as "for seasons and days and years."

(d) The miraculous outpouring of the Holy Spirit when the Church began its existence (Acts ii, 1-4) was timed to take place on the day of Pentecost. On the same day the law had been promulgated by Moses—the practical beginning of the first dispensation.

It has often been suggested that the Nativity took place on the first day of a feast of Tabernacles, the fifteenth day of the seventh month, one day after full moon ; but want of space prevents us from enumerating the inferences which support this view. Let us assume, however, that it was so.

(a) The Annunciation to the Virgin Mary must have been some forty weeks before the Nativity, and so it could well have been at the holy day of the new moon of the tenth month of the previous year, about the middle of December, when sowing took place. A sign of a new beginning was thus given in the heavens, and the sowers unconsciously proclaimed the same on earth.

(b) As John the Baptist was five to six months older than Christ (see Luke i, 13, 24, 26), his birth must have been in the month following the Passover (for that feast and Tabernacles are six months apart), just before the harvest was reaped—a time of want to the poorer classes, as the stores of corn of the previous year then ran very low. Christ on the other hand was born (we have assumed) at the glad feast of Tabernacles, when all the fruits of the earth had been gathered in. The condition of things at the birth of the forerunner and of Christ thus harmonised with their characters described in Matt. xi, 18, 19: "John came neither eating nor drinking . . . the Son of Man came eating and drinking."

Several miracles (five or six at least) during Christ's ministry were specially appropriate to the times at which they took place ; for one instance, the feeding of the five thousand was certainly (as the birth of John was probably) at a time shortly before harvest (John vi, 4-14), when consequently the need was greater than usual.

This appropriateness of the seasons at which the births of John and of Christ and the feeding of the five thousand took place is

intensified in each case by the very probable circumstance that each event came in a year which followed a Sabbath one, when there was no sowing and practically no harvest ; but want of space prevents our giving the historical data to support this assumption.\*

Rev. W. F. KIMM, M.A.—It has been objected against miracles that they are violations of law, and therefore inconceivable in a universe planned with perfect wisdom and foreknowledge.

The paper has shown that this is not the Scriptural idea of miracles.

Moreover all men know that there are laws and laws, and that some “laws of nature” are sometimes contravened or controlled or superseded by others.

The skylark soars upwards, beating the air with its wings, and the air presses back with a pressure due to the weight of the air, which is due to gravitation, and so the bird is pressed up and up, until suddenly it folds its wings and then it falls under the action of gravitation. The same law which serves to bring the bird to the ground, serves to raise it to the clouds when the nervous and muscular energy and the will of the bird are brought into play.

The “laws of nature” are matters of human discovery, and men are still discovering, and it is highly probable there are many laws yet to be discovered ; so that the objection to miracles on the ground of the unchangeableness of law must stand aside until we know all laws and all their interactions.

But when we seek to discover the scriptural idea of miracles we find mention of laws of another kind, which are from the scriptural point of view laws indeed, being the express declaration of the mind of the Lawgiver and not mere inferences deduced from an imperfect observation of His works.

These are referred to in the paper more or less directly among the cases “which natural science is not in a position to fathom.”

The “laws of nature” which are merely customary modes of procedure in nature may be compared to common law which is merely custom and often difficult to determine for lack of evidence.

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\* The subjects briefly alluded to here will be found fully considered in a book shortly to be published entitled, *The Magi ; how they recognised Christ's Star.*

But we have also Statute Law which supersedes common law whenever the interests of the State require it.

Such a supreme law we find set forth in the Scriptures, and miracles are always linked in with some declaration of the divine will, or they take place as answers to prayer, according to the gracious laws which regulate the intercourse of the heavenly Father with His children.

In neither case is there any violation of law, but a fulfilment.

Mr. M. L. ROUSE.—Science constantly brings us to a borderland where wholly secret forces are in operation. As I heard Lord Rayleigh say in an address to the British Association, after he had alluded to the “life-long beliefs of Newton, Faraday and Maxwell.” “In his heart the man of science knows that underneath the theories that he constructs there lie contradictions which he cannot reconcile. The higher mysteries of being, if penetrable at all by human intellect, require other weapons than those of calculation and experiment.”

Chemical affinities are still a mystery ; and so is the impalpable, imponderable ether, which transmits the electric current and light when air is altogether absent. But what of life, with its marvels of nutrition, growth and reproduction—the nutrient fluids, as the late Professor Beale delighted to tell us constantly working against gravity; the creature (as he showed us in the case of a caterpillar) developing day by day out of a drop of liquid in which no microscope can detect any structure at all ; and every normal plant and animal having stored up within itself and one within the other a creature of like form to its parents for a thousand generations ? Paley likened a living creature to a watch, and appealed to the sceptic to acknowledge that it equally required a purposeful maker ; but what should we say of a watch that had stored within itself, barrel within barrel, a thousand machines ready to take its place one after another ?

If the original gospel that our modern rationalists speak of really existed in the first century and the four gospels were introduced in its place, as they make out, at the beginning of the second century (when, as we gather from Tacitus and Pliny, there were about a million Christians in the Roman world), do we suppose (knowing upon what far slighter grounds Christian sects have been readily formed) that a sect would not at once have sprung up contending for the use of the original Gospel in its simplicity ?

Professor ORCHARD.—All religion is based upon the supernatural, and in the case of Christianity, the supernatural involves the miraculous. Eliminate the supernatural, and (as we are reminded on p. 75) there will be no Gospel left worth preaching or believing.

A miracle may, I think, be defined as an unusual manifestation of supernatural power. As pointed out by the author, Christ is Himself "the miracle of miracles." Renan has justly remarked that the character of the Lord Jesus is such that it could not have been invented—"It would require a Jesus to invent a Jesus."

The miracles which He wrought were always attestations to His mission and teaching, that men, believing in Him, might have life through His name.

The SECRETARY wished to join in his expression of gratitude to the author, not only for the paper but for the willing manner in which Canon Girdlestone had undertaken to prepare it, when it was suggested to him on the occasion of a meeting which took place at Whitby last summer. Such papers as that now before the meeting could not fail to be helpful to many anxious minds, tending to strengthen faith in the miraculous statements both of the Old and New Testaments, and particularly at a time when indifference and unbelief is unhappily prevalent in society. Knowing how full of work is Canon Girdlestone, he (the Secretary) felt it was especially kind in him to undertake a task which must have added much to his labours.\*

A warm vote of thanks was then passed to the author, who replied to a few points raised in the debate, and the meeting separated.

\* In reference to the miracle of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, which to us seems one of the most notable, and was certainly one of the most publicly recognised, it may be suggested that our Lord exercised his power rather to preserve the body of Lazarus from decomposition than to raise it to life after decomposition had set in. The statement, a very natural one of Martha (John xi, 39), was not assented to by the Saviour, who always adopted the simplest means in carrying out His gracious purposes. Having from the beginning determined on calling Lazarus from the grave He would in accordance with this view have adopted the simpler course above suggested.—Ed.